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# Narrating networks: A narrative approach of relational data collection.

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## Abstract

The article discusses the potential of narrative interviewing techniques in the context of a computer-assisted collection of relational network data. It illustrates a way in which the data collection instrument can be conceptualised in order to stimulate narrative and communicative structuring processes about network relations. On the basis of an ethnographic research design the paper describes the empirical process of data collection and introduces an innovative strategy of analysing qualitative relational data through hermeneutic interpretation. Besides exemplifying pros and cons linked with the technical construction of the interview design, the article points out opportunities and limitations to a narrative interview method that is used to reconstruct ego-centred social networks. Insofar as they encourage narrations, we conclude that relational data collections can even function as narration generators.

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## 1. Narrating Networks

Although methodical – compared to theoretical – articles dominate sociological research on networks, practice-oriented methodical reports are rarely published. There is a lack of methodical field reports that describe the research process as a whole – from prearrangement and data collection to analysis – and make it accessible to a critical discourse. This appears to be specifically required in cases of qualitative and narrative approaches that, in the meantime, enjoy quite a good reputation among the scientific community (cf. Hollstein and Straus 2006) but are facing all the more critical observations. This applies particularly to open and explorative approaches (for an overview, see also Hollstein 2011). To enable the estimation of the reliability and plausibility of the empiric results, the reflexion of methodical approaches and interpretation strategies should be carried out accurately.

In light of this, the article discusses the potential of narrative interviewing techniques in the context of a computer-assisted collection of relational network data. On the basis of an ethnographic research design, this paper illustrates one way in which a data collection instrument can be conceptualised in order to stimulate narrative and communicative structuring processes about network relations. In the following, it will be revealed how relational and narration aided data were collected and analysed. This includes the presentation of a newly developed analytic design for qualitative network data, that focused on hermeneutical interpretation with respect to communication analysis. Finally, the potentials and limitations of narrative data collection will be critically discussed regarding the reconstruction of ego-centred social networks.

## 2. Qualitative Narration-based Network Data Collection in the Project “Spatial Pioneers of Urban Quarters”

The research project “Spatial Pioneers of Urban Quarters. Towards a Communicative Construction of Spaces in Structural Transformation” follows an approach based on the sociology of knowledge. It examines how so called spatial pioneers can influence processes of spatial (re-)construction in problematic urban quarters by their specific discretion to act. A central question in this context is why the spatial visions of spatial pioneers generate comparatively more impact than those of other social actors and groups of actors.

Spatial Pioneers can be understood as social actors and groups of actors that are spatially committed. They generate resonance by irritating established perspectives on urban spaces by means of their new spatial visions, innovative ideas and concepts. In doing so they initiate modification and transformation processes towards a positive development of problematic urban quarters, for example by improving the quality of life in their neighbourhood or the entrenched negative images their quarter is affected by.

The spatial pioneers and the urban quarters they are engaged in are examined from an ethnographic research approach with a mixed-methods-design including problem-centred interviews, participatory observations in selected groups as well as discourse analysis of collected public documents. Furthermore we integrated a qualitative network research approach within our interviews in order to explore engagement-related network ties of individual spatial pioneers. We understand networks as social forums of communication in which not only space-related social knowledge is generated, conveyed and made applicable (cf. Christmann and Büttner 2011), but also communications on a wider array of topics can take place.

Assertiveness and potential for actions of spatial pioneers were on one hand examined on the basis of attributive features related to the very person, in terms of their motivation for actions, their communication style, their educational and economical capital; on the other hand on the basis of relational network features, as for example the form, the extent or the specific position within the relation networks in the course of their engagement.

If we want to understand the actions and communications of social actors such as spatial pioneers in a more profound way, we have to reconstruct not only their motives, their structures of relevance and expectations but also the social context of their acting. Their embeddedness in a context of relationships enables us to identify how spatial pioneers affect collective knowledge by means of their spatial visions.

Insofar, as social action is related to social knowledge (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966) social actions of others can potentially be influenced by the knowledge of spatial pioneers. Moreover, networks of spatial pioneers shed light on the options to act which are open to them in principle. In this context, networks can also be seen as structures of meaning, and network ties as intersections between diverging parts of cultural knowledge stocks. Accordingly, the specific ways in which pioneers structure their own networks also hint at their own specific structures of meaning they use to interpret themselves and their social world (cf. Fuhse 2008: 2936). In this sense relational features should be considered, if one tries to figure out why and how some spatial pioneers gain more resonance and attention for their alternative socio-spatial visions than others and why just these easily realise their ideas and initiate transformation processes. Last but not least, according to social capital approaches those are the ones through whom resource potential in terms of social capital is generated (cf. Bourdieu 1983:191).

### *1.1. The Development of the Instrument*

#### *1.1.1. Preliminary Considerations and Conceptualisation*

In order to assess operational capacities or channels information potentially flows through, we aimed for identifying relevant network cut points available to spatial pioneers. A relational perspective promised to answer questions even on partially latent power structures. In this regard we thought it conceivable to combine a field-specific network topography with a formal network analysis within our research field “urban quarters” (e.g. by means of the block-model analysis to identify central positions of locally involved actors). But we decided to refrain from using formal network analysis approaches for several reasons. We expected the ethnographic design of the project to provide reasonable conclusions on whether spatial pioneers have a certain assertiveness regarding their socio-spatial perceptions. Problem-centred individual interviews and participant observation in the field were focused as well as discourse analysis on the basis of collected documents. Based on such an integrative methodology of focused ethnography (cf. Knoblauch 2001) it was considered necessary to apply a triangulation of various qualitative data types and interpretation methods. To make use of a quantitative approach would have meant to significantly enlarge the sample of interview partners causing efforts which would not have been possible to cope within our project framework. Another problem that would have appeared during a quantitative network research is that it does not consider “external relations of the interviewed sample” (Schnegg and Lang 2001: 7). “It needs to be identified whether the research question aims at statements about a defined social system or the social integration of certain actors” (l.c.: 13).

The purpose of our network research was to reconstruct possible individual options for action of spatial pioneers in the context of their social integration. Therefore, the decision to focus on ego-centred

networks within a qualitative ethnographic approach was plausible. Since with “qualitative network analysis does the network of interactions become accessible the way it is perceived by the interviewed actor. This perception is the basis for his interventions” (Häussling 2006: 148). Finally, we decided to integrate our tool for network data collection into the problem-centred interview.

### *1.1.2. Social Network Analysis and qualitative Interviews*

Qualitative research of networks is a relatively new branch of research. Yet it is increasingly recognized in the German-speaking socio-scientific community (Hollstein & Straus 2006 and Hollstein 2011 provide an overview of recent theoretical and empirical concepts of qualitative network analysis; see Diaz-Bone 2007 for a critical discussion in regard to formal network analysis). In comparison to quantitative methods of formal network analysis, there are rather few experiences with qualitative interviews in network research (Hollstein 2011 gives an overview; on qualitative interviews as a method see Lamnek 2005: 329-402; on phases and techniques of narrative and problem-centred interviews in particular pp. 357-361 and 363-367; see also Rosenthal 2005: 125-160). In general, these qualitative approaches are exploratory. Hereby, problem-centered interviews (cf. Lonkila & Salmi 2005; Bernardi et. al. 2007; Scheibelhofer 2008; cf. Hollstein 2011: 411) admit focussing certain topics. In order to encourage stories that reflect the subjective views of interviewees, however, questions are usually developed in an “open end“-style (cf. Hollstein 2011: 411). The scientific interest of ego-centered approaches in qualitative network research primarily focuses on the development of ego-alter relations (ibid.). Usually, no survey of the entire network is wanted, but rather an assessment of subjective perspectives of action such as certain networking strategies of the interviewed actors. In this respect, the overall purpose of the examination approaches is the achievement of a meaningful depth of data (cf. Hollstein 2011: 404-405).

This is a methodical challenge that requires approaches designed with open questioning techniques, which are typical for narrative interviews in general (cf. Rosenthal, 2005: 48-54). In an interview situation it is not only important to generate the nomination of social partners in a certain context, which can be represented as a map (name generator function); at the same time, however, one should also seek the interpretation of these ego-alter relationships by the respondent in terms of stories about these relationships (function of interpretation). While using qualitative interviews the narrative principle is therefore crucial for analyses of ego-centered network data. This means that questions are openly posed, topics might also be confined (e.g. in the form of a problem-centered interview of cooperative relations in the context of a project) and stimuli are offered to generate narratives (cf. Lamnek 2005: 364-365). Figuratively spoken, the interviewee is presented “a blank page to be filled in by the interviewee” himself (Merton & Kendall 1956: 15; quoted according to Lamnek 2005: 365).

In consequence, through collecting a rather formal type of data (i.e. a figure of a network map) at the same time a sort of data is to be collected which is suitable for qualitative analysis (e.g. audio data of the interview conversation, which may be transcribed afterwards). Against the background of existing studies Hollstein and Pfeffer (2010: 2) estimate maps of ego-centered networks of interviewees as being useful in order to support their narrations. Thus, a “visualized network can serve as cognitive support of the survey. This is especially important for complex objects such as social networks. For qualitative surveys, which are aimed at the settling of relevance and at the action orientations of the actors [...], maps may also serve as a medium, on the basis of which the actors can speak about these relations (generator of narration)” (ibid.). Hereby, it are those forms of network mapping that are not pre-structured and thus openly

planned, which have the greatest potential for generating narratives (cf. Hollstein & Pfeffer 2010: 3). They literally provide such “a blank page to be filled by the interviewee” (Merton & Kendall 1956: 15; quoted according to Lamnek 2005: 365). Such maps are particularly suitable as a “tool for collecting data, in order to get as near to the action orientations of the actors as possible (based on the individual meaning and design of networks)” (Hollstein & Pfeffer 2010: 3; see Scheibelhofer 2006 as an empirical example). However, Hollstein and Pfeffer (2010: 3) state “that the maps themselves are not comparable”.

As for the analysis of such data, an own approach was developed in the project “Spatial Pioneers of Urban Quarters” that makes it possible to evaluate these different data types triangulatively. Generally, the possibility of a triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative analyses is considered as a “surplus of mixed method designs” (Hollstein 2011: 413; see also Franke & Wald 2006). Nevertheless, our own analyses remained in the qualitative realm and, for instance, focussed on individual networking strategies. The analytic approach combined a hermeneutic perspective on the basis of the sociology of knowledge (cf. Schröer 1997) with a sequential conversation analysis. It thereby is a modification of the ethnographic conversation analysis as described by Arnulf Deppermann (cf. Deppermann 2000; Deppermann and Schmitt 2009).

The initial analytical step was to hermeneutically interpret the visual structures of the network by members of the research group that had not been involved in the data collection. Comparative systematisations of peculiar attributes then suggested more global hypotheses about the case. Comparing the case with others could validate or imply modification of those data-based structural hypotheses. Ethnographic knowledge of further members of the research group was gradually introduced into the interpretation process by using interview sequences, results of the participation observation or discourse analysis (cf. Neumann and Schmidt 2012). In this manner it is possible “to swing back and forth between induction and deduction in terms of a hermeneutic spiral [...] to develop a Grounded Theory (cf. Mey and Mruck 2007) of networking-, co-operation- and communication-structures of spatial pioneers within their spatial-oriented projects” (Neumann and Schmidt 2012).

### *1.1.3. Development of the Interview Guideline*

For the interview guideline the qualitatively oriented network concept suggests to focus on the systematic collection of the pioneers’ relevant relations within the realm of their project. These networking aspects should be considered in the guideline of the problem-centred interview, if applicable, to enable a reconstruction of meaning. Thus, it is possible to utilise the advantages of narrative data collection techniques as well as the avoidance of additional appointments with the interviewees. Just as the concept of a problem-centred interview, parts of the guideline that are concerned with collection of network data are ideally based on the typical phases of a narrative interview (cf. Rosenthal 2005: 143 et seq.). After having talked about project contacts, the interviewees are then “obliged to tell” (Rosenthal 2005: 141) more about their view on social relations to their alteri. Being asked to think aloud, the interviewees were obliged to externalise their subjective interpretations during the interview conversation. For being tape-recorded this process was intended to enable a hermeneutic analysis of the interview conversation later on.

Therefore, the use of pre-structuring elements, such as concentric circles (cf. Kahn and Antonucci 1980) were intentionally relinquished. Also, standardised name generators like those of Burt (1984) or Fischer (1982) were considered unrewarding. After all, we wanted to leave the structuring of the networks to the interviewees and to their own focus. The idea of the guideline was to offer only a

thematic orientation to the interviewers that could be handled flexible depending on the course of the conversation. Questions had to be worded rather openly in order to stimulate answers of narrative kind. Furthermore, questions were intended to gain information on further interests – e.g. concerning local key actors (i.e. “If you wanted to develop a project around here, who would you consider as being an important person to contact?”). Even in case of difficulties on the part of the interviewed subjects, e.g. to characterise the quality of relations, it was intended to ask questions as open as possible, such as (“How would you describe your relation to the mentioned person/institution?”). Where applicable it was possible to suggest some categories based on preliminary considerations about how ego-alter-relations could possibly be qualified (i.e. as friendly, as hindering, cooperative, or of strategic importance, financial relevance, as helpful or even as ambivalent).

#### *1.1.4. From Paper to Laptop*

Designing a simple narratively embedded instrument of network data collection suitable for field work, it was hardly possible to utilise existing concepts (as inspiring, however, see Corsten 2007). Initially, the intention was to simply construct interactive maps of ego-centred networks on a blank sheet of paper with coloured stickers and pens representing ego, its alteri as well as locations and institutions of relevance. The relations' qualities should be marked through coloured lines drawn simultaneously to the interactive process of network reconstruction between interviewer and interviewee (for instance, red sticker dots representing individual actors or a red line between ego and alter to denote a hindering relation between them). Being completed, such ego-networks were intended to be documented by photo, and the whole interaction process was supposed to be tape-recorded.

With the access to a beta-version of the VennMaker software since mid-2009 we refrained from these conceptual considerations. VennMaker was developed at the university of Trier to collect, depict and analyse actor-oriented qualitative network data. The software enabled us not only to tape interview conversations but also to video-tape each single step of the network construction process on the screen. This was of particular interest to us. Because, after all, our qualitative network data was considered to allow a hermeneutic, sequential analysis of both: the step-by-step network map construction and the interview conversation.

Using the “Free Network Drawing” mode, the interface resembled the originally intended paper version of an interview. In order to enable interviewers to be approximately as flexible during the communication-intense interview situation as they would usually have been with pen and paper, the interface of VennMaker was adjusted to the needs of our project.

To ease the handling in the interview situation, the VennMaker interface was partly pre-configured. Regarding the name generator function, the menu contained four buttons: first an ego-item, second circles for single actors, third squares representing groups or institutions and, last, triangles symbolising places which were meant to represent possible local hotspots of communication and knowledge exchange. Generating names of alteri, questions could in many cases tie up to previous interview narrations, for instance on the project work. As a next step questions aimed at narrations on the quality of ego-alter-relations. For this purpose we provided preconfigured buttons (like being friends, being helpful or of strategic importance), which could be suggested by the interviewer in case the interviewees had difficulties to circumscribe their relations by themselves, and could easily be extended or modified together with the interviewee.

### 3. Experiences with Narrative Network Data Collection

So far it has become clear, that a combination of network research and narrative interview techniques implies various requirements. It could be seen that it affects general problems such as the conception of the name generator, interviewer instructions and the interview procedure itself but also the handling of the interview situation and, especially within this ethnographic project, the design of the data collection software. Referring to that, this chapter deals with the following questions: Has the interview guideline proved itself advantageous regarding narrative impulses during the data collection? How are narrations of the interviewees influenced by the interviewer or the circumstances in the interview situation? Which elements of the interview guidelines have proved to be unfavourable or, conversely, particularly conducive to generate meaningful network data through narrations?

First, we give a brief overview of the situation of data collection in the field. After that, a critical reflexion on the narrative network data collection illustrates how those requirements could be met and identifies some limitations and advantages of the chosen approach in the light of the empirical experiences.

#### *1.2. In the Field: The Process of Ego-Centred Network Data Collection*

Right after the first part of the interview, using a laptop with the VennMaker software and a projector, the interviewee<sup>2</sup> was presented a blank network map only containing an ego item in the centre, representing the interviewee. She or he was then asked by the interviewer, which items and constellations (of actors, groups/institutions or places) should appear on the map in the realm of the project work.

In a second step the quality of the particular relations between ego and its alteri was narratively clarified. In order to elicit the interviewees' subjective meaning during the network construction process, they were additionally asked to constantly think aloud during the interview (cf. Huber and Mandl 1994; Richardson 1996). The interviewees were encouraged to (re)arrange the named items according to the quality of their relation. The developed network's topography depicts how close or distant the interviewee senses the relations to her or his alteri to be. The intention was rather not to predetermine any categories of social closeness or distance. From time to time the respondents themselves started grouping or arranging the mentioned alteri in an individual way and, at the same time, explained their reasons to do so to the interviewer. We did not focus on how many alteri, but on the question which alteri were mentioned and in which manner they were arranged. Because, based on the qualitative approach, we primarily did not aim at a survey of the individual project network in its entirety. The number of nominations of alteri therefore remained unlimited in principal.

Each phase of narration and generation of alteri in terms of individual actors, institutions or locations was supposed to be followed by short phases of reflexion. These phases allowed the interviewed person to rethink and reflect aloud whilst the interviewer was able to generate further questions based on taken notes. To stimulate further narrations, the interviewer now could come up again with actors, locations and institutions which had already been mentioned previously in the course of the interview. Because during the first part of the interview questions on the project and space-related involvement of the interviewees in many cases already stimulated narrations about network relations by referring to relevant contacts in the context of the particular project.

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<sup>2</sup> The sample of about seventy interviewed persons was gathered over the course of the research project according to the method of theoretical sampling as described in Glaser & Strauss 1967: 45-78; see also Rosenthal 2005: 85-88.



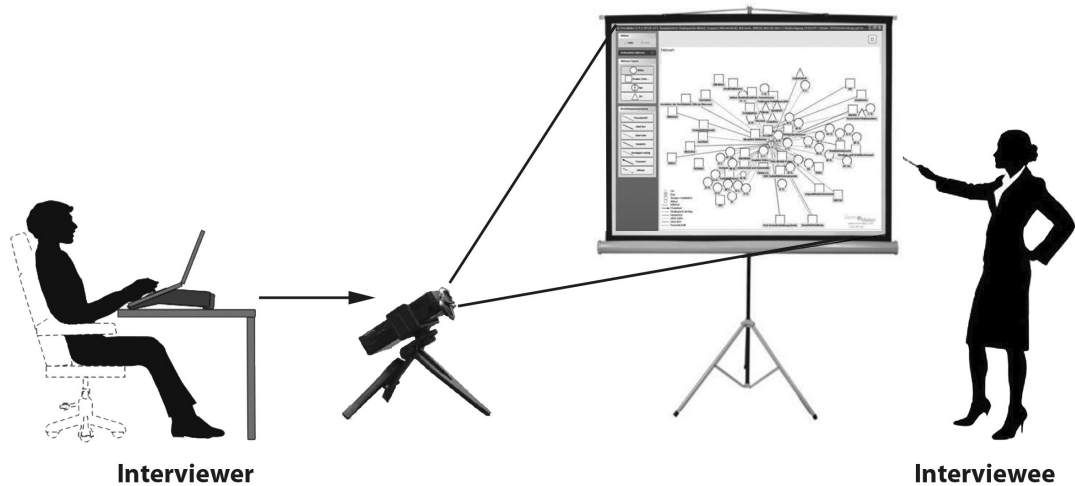


Fig 1 (a) Setup for Data Collection in the field

The alternating between questioning and loud thinking in the interviews resulted in dense interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Figure 1 shows the ideal research setup in the field. The VennMaker-interface is projected onto a screen using a projector. In the process of the ego-centred network data collection, the interviewee has a conversation with the interviewer, who simultaneously utilises the VennMaker software. He is guided by the instructions of the interviewee, who reacts to the questions or inquiries posed by the interviewer. Both of them are not just in a conversation, but in a situation of joint action that directs the respondent's focus of attention to the gradually developing network image and requires further explanations during the concurrent conversation.

The interviewer could decide individually, which topic to expand or when the data collection should be ended. Optimally, the interview process was completed when, even after repeated requests and phases of reflexion, no further narratives were revealed, that were relevant to the interest of research. In this open-design and highly interactive approach both difficulties and advantages showed up in the field, which will be explained below.

### *1.3. Limitations and Advantages – Some Critical Reflexions*

#### *1.3.1. Openness of the Interview Guideline*

Due to the effort to obtain data by narration we deliberately decided against a name generator which is usually applied for the collection of relational data. For instance, Burt only generates alteri with whom the



research subject discusses important issues of the previous six months (cf. Schenk 1995: 32). However, our assumption was that some actors distinguish between personal/private contacts and those contacts that are important regarding their projects or commitment – which proved to be valid. The interviewee does therefore not automatically associate the discussion of important personal matters with his spatial project activities. He/she is able to discuss important personal matters with commitment-related actors but does not necessarily do so. Furthermore, it proved unfavourable to define a certain time frame for the collection of project relevant contacts (such as six months) beforehand.

The deliberate decision against Burt (and also Fischer) permitted the application of a method that is more open regarding the number of network contacts. In that way, it can be illustrated, that, on average, spatial-related project networks obtain a significantly higher amount of network contacts than Burt with three ( $\emptyset$  3) and Fischer with eight ( $\emptyset$  8) network partners showed. That means that spatial pioneers need a lot of mostly heterogenic network relations to implement their ideas.

But if a network data collection is used to create a substantial construction of network relations beyond solitary accounts of single alteri, the challenge arises to create a name generator, which enables the interviewee to structure the important network partners independently. Additionally, the name generator needs to be embedded in an interview situation, which leaves room for subjective interpretations and patterns of argumentations, which are basic elements of narrations.

The vast relinquishment of standardised suggestions allows a flexible handling of order and design of the questions. The interview partners are able to answer as openly as possible (cf. Lamnek 2005: 352). The openly worded interview guideline adheres to these criteria insofar as it enables the discovery of so far unknown aspects. It resembles an explorative approach as it is appropriate for research objects such as spatial pioneers. This procedure leads to high content validity of the results without making representative and quantitative statements. The more the method relates to the interviewees' own structures of relevance, however, even more important can become research-ethical aspects. Those imply that the interviewees' data is treated in a reliable manner while adhering to data protection principles and anonymisation standards (cf. Schönhuth 2009: 30-31). On the other hand the interviewers are especially challenged by the fact that the interview is largely affected by the interviewee's focus (cf. Lamnek 2005: 21).

### *1.3.2. Interviewer Effects*

The more open an interview guideline is handled the more vulnerable it becomes towards interview effects. As a result, it can not be excluded that interviewer effects can possibly influence the specific shape of ego-centred social network maps.

In some interviews, the interviewers preferred to start with collecting the names of all actors, actor groups and locations that are relevant for the particular network before clearing the relation contents as a next step, which is similar to the classical order of name generator approaches. Other interviewers decided to discuss the contents of ego-alter-i-relations subsequently after a name or a relation had been mentioned. The latter approach may imply that the interviewee's cognition will be influenced by the immediate reflexion on the interaction with a certain other person. Thus, the interviewee might temporarily forget about the relations to other network-related actors and will therefore not identify them as part of the network. But the interviewee will presumably remember key personalities of the network. Therefore the validity of this interview technique is not necessarily limited. The former approach, which does not refer to the content of the relation to alteri directly after their mentioning, tended to create sequences of

dropping names instead of narrations about particular relations. Nevertheless, all of the cases gained rather positive experiences regarding the stimulation of narrations.

Notwithstanding the question order, the interviewers' priority was the effort to respect the interviewees' focus and their narrative habits. As a consequence, regarding the comparability of the ego-network figures by means of objective structural attributes, a comparative analysis of individual network images needs to consider the circumstances under which the image has been constructed. In our research, just as mentioned above according to Hollstein & Pfeffer (2010: 3), the network maps themselves were hardly comparable without reference to the specific context of data collection of each case.

### *1.3.3. Interview Situation*

From a rather technical view the interview situation required both, flexibility and adaptability. As advantageous computer aided research equipment may be for the documentation and evaluation of data, the high level of mechanisation may be unfavourable for ethnographic research situations. The lack of electrical outlets and a projection area could be compensated by multiple socket-outlets and paper rolls brought by the interviewers. To facilitate matters, it was decided to progressively relinquish from a projection. Instead the network construction was performed on a laptop display together with the interviewees. The majority of the interviewees and interviewers had a well educated, mostly academic background which can retrospectively be regarded as an advantage. On the one hand this implied a rather small social distance between the interviewers and their interview partners, apart from a few exceptional cases. As a consequence, the interviewees accepted a short distance between the two seats. Furthermore, the answers to rather delicate subjects – e.g. questions on conflicting relations – were generally less distorted (cf. Diekmann 2004: 339). On the other hand, the interviewees were comparatively little reserved regarding contact with the technical setting. However, if computer-aided research equipment is used it is necessary to consider the varied affinity for technology on part of the different interviewed persons when developing the research method.

In addition to the problem to preserve the anonymity of network members, the present research structure was facing rather practical problems, especially during research situations in public spaces (e.g. in a restaurant). It is hardly possible to maintain confidentiality if a network construction is projected in a public space. However, it was possible to create spontaneously an atmosphere of trust by using the display without the projector.

In some cases, the presence of third parties during an interview in a public space may have caused the interviewees to give less distinct answers (cf. Diekmann 2004: 401). Namely, there were some cases in which interview process and network construction were disturbed by the appearance of a third person who started a conversation with the interviewee. It was possible to avoid responses influenced by social desirability because the interview was usually interrupted. Such disturbances could cause distractions of the narrations in the course of the interview. This has to be acknowledged as being a general problem of ethnographic interviews and certainly also applies to collections of narrative network data through interviews. Unfortunately, it is difficult to prevent such difficulties during the research process. Conversely, to arrange an interview in an everyday environment provides the chance to gain knowledge about local living conditions which will be instructive for the identification of different types of actors and networks.

#### 1.3.4. *Ego-oriented instead of Ego-centred*

In retrospect, the predefined central position of ego in the middle of her or his network was limitative in a narrative sense. It precluded narrations about the self-positioning of the interviewee in the network. Regarding, for instance, constellations of closeness or distance, it would have been instructive to know about the interviewees self-positioning within his or her network, even though an ego-centred view would not have hindered the integration of network members that are important to the interviewee. Consequently, an instrument for ego-centred network data collection should consider to work ego-oriented instead of ego-centred. Within the own approach it could have had advantages to handle even the positioning of ego openly. For reconstructions of ego-centred networks are exclusively developed from an individual person's perspective the interviewee will identify relations to alteri, but might not necessarily understand herself/himself as the centre of her/his network relations.

The approach of Corsten (2007) could be helpful to solve such problems. In his work, it are the interviewees themselves that are responsible for the final self-positioning of an ego-item inside the own network picture at the end of the interrogation. The advantage of Corsten's approach is that reflexions on the own position of action are encouraged. However, it becomes difficult to stimulate narratives about the quality of the relation to each of the alteri during the interview conversation. Had the ego character been introduced at the end, there would have been a need for a rather cursory interrogation on the relationship qualities of alteri in the project "Spatial Pioneers of Urban Quarters". In regard to the actor-centered approach therein, we analyse project-related cooperation networks of actors. We try to comprehend these relationship qualities, networking strategies and options as presented in perspective of the respondent. Thus, our research interest differs slightly from Corsten (2007).

For open research designs which try to utilize visual, in situ generated ego-centric network representations as generators of narrations, it is crucial to clarify from the outset which aspects of the ego-alteri relations are most important for the research interest to design the survey instruments appropriately. In this regard, extensive pre-testing has been particularly useful in the project "Spatial Pioneers of Urban Quarters".

#### 1.3.5. *Phases of Reflexion*

Repeated periods of reflexions have proved to be particularly advantageous in a narrative sense. The visibility of the total network formation invites the respondents to further contemplations about the network topography, especially at the end of the interactive interview situation.

By asking specified questions developed from the interviewer's notes, the interviewer was able to follow numerous links towards a concretion of the network's overall view. During the interview the interviewer could ask for the interviewee's self-perception regarding the project relations. The answers were not only registered but could subsequently be integrated in the developed network image. In some cases this has led to surprising – and narration stimulating – conclusions on part of the interviewees.

Based on inquiries concerning specific ego-alteri relations, processes of reflexion could be stimulated, which went beyond this single relationship. For instance, reflexions on institutional frameworks or cooperation problems with institutional actors within the district in general could be connected to stories of conflictual relations in regard to certain alteri. Talking about supporters or particularly helpful or cooperative relationships also reminded the respondents of their own action potentials, which, in many

cases, led to continuous extensive narratives. The need to make the narrative comprehensible to another person, in this case the interviewer, (cf. the “pushing forces of narration” in Rosenthal 2005: 141) has therefore not only proven profitable for the clarification of certain ego-alter relations, but in many cases has led to an embedding of these contacts by the respondent himself. The respondents developed connecting points that illuminated the socio-spatial context of their networking activities and their commitment to the project. Thus, a large density of data could already be produced through the qualifications of the mentioned individual network contacts (function of interpretation). This data was continuously supported through repeated periods of reflexion while analyzing the existing network image that had been produced in the survey situation itself.

As already mentioned above, the rather technical setup in the interview situation had some disadvantages. However, regarding extended reflexions the advantages of alternatively generating network maps sitting side-by-side with the interviewee in front of a laptop display became apparent. The open-plan conversations, which sometimes went on for up to three hours, as well as the interactive design of the survey situation played an important role in creating an intense situation for joint action, which was very helpful to encourage reflexions and loud thinking.

This enabled to create a certain level of understanding and mutual trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. Furthermore, empathy and communication skills should not to be underestimated in the context of narrative data collection. They are essential to create confidence, for instance, when it comes to narrations on conflictuous ego-alter relations. As a matter of fact, unlike standardized network survey methods ethnographic approaches demand to further engage in their “object” of research, the interviewee. For, finally, they depend on the actor’s openness and willingness to speak as freely as possible.

#### **4. Network Data Collection as Narration Generator**

To sum up, the narrative collection of network contacts and the quality of their relations allows us to embed ego-alter relations in situational contexts and ensures meaningful depth of data. Compared with other text types such as essay or report, a narrative is explicitly connected with “a certain time, a certain space and a certain person” and does therefore offer the “highest degree of indexicality and details” (Rosenthal 2005: 139). This enables the interpretation of the developed network images as the subjective content of social relation structures becomes apparent. Deeper knowledge about how they were formed gives us the possibility to draw conclusions on dynamics and development of individual project networks. During the narrative network data collection the interviewees not only listed their project relevant network partners they also expressed their networking strategies and commented on the role of further key actors and spatial pioneers. Thereby a narrative network data collection encourages further explanations and validations concerning the social relationships of the interviewee.

Especially conventional questionnaires are not able to meet the demand to stimulate not only the naming of contacts but encouraging narrations on relations’ qualities. If a network research approach aims to gain a comprehensive description of network relations through selective narrations about individual subjects it is instructive for the interviewer to take notes on the social relations within a network mentioned during the course of a problem-centred interview. However, an ex-post-visualisation with the help of those notes would only lead to a reconstruction from the perception of the interviewer, which has already been influenced by his own evaluations. If required, it is possible to present such network images to the interviewee in order to provide a focused basis for further reflexion. Such a procedure would admittedly confine the original network images constructed by the interviewee. In particular, the

heuristically valuable documentation of the “self-explanations” would be given away, as it was collected during the interactive network construction.

Consequently, network research and narration are not necessarily in contrary to each other. Indeed, the narrational network data collection enables an intense communication process between interviewer and interviewee as well as a participatory-reflexive act. An image of its own network can stimulate the research subject to tell more and in more detail about its relations to other actors (cf. Hollstein and Pfeffer 2006), as they were developed in the moment of the interview and not cognitively disconnected from it. Insofar as they encourage narrations relational data collections can even function as narration generators.

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